

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

Testimony By

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Mr. Chairman:

The National Wildlife Refuge System has received increasing attention by the Congress and conservation interests during the past decade, and this hearing and its topic is most welcome. We commend you for introducing H.R. 4442, the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act, along with other leaders in the Congress. As a firm starting point, we at the Institute support the need to establish a commission to promote public awareness of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Further, a full expression of the needs of the system through a plan by the Fish and Wildlife Service, would be useful to Congress and Refuge System supporters. We hope that such improved visibility can lead to a commitment to materially advance the capability of refuges in celebration of the 100th anniversary in 2003. We appreciate being here before this Committee again, on a familiar topic on which the Committee has consistently exercised its leadership.

The past several years has brought us before your Committee frequently on behalf of National Wildlife Refuges. On May 25, 1995 in support of development what became of the Refuge Improvement Act eventually passed in 1997. On September 19, 1996 speaking for the Cooperative Alliance For Refuge Enhancement (CARE) about operation and maintenance needs of the system, and on June 18, 1997 speaking again for CARE to document progress in cooperative efforts by member organizations working to enhance funding and volunteer support for operation and maintenance as well. We appreciate the progress the National Wildlife Refuge System has made through the efforts of this Committee in many ways, including passage of the 1997 Improvement Act and The National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act which you personally sponsored and passed in 1998.

Mr. Chairman, we are confident you are aware that a wide variety of non-government organizations have

awakened to the needs of the refuge system, the Fish and Wildlife Service and Department of Interior have made refuges more visible and a higher priority, and the Congress has responded with additional appropriations and broader attention to the needs of refuges. All of this is a great step in the direction of better stewardship for this vitally important system of wildlands that focus on wildlife.

Your statement on May 11, 2000 announcing the introduction of the Centennial Act said it exactly right. "The American people deserve the finest refuge system in the world". Your reference to the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt, your recognition of the progress in the use of volunteers on refuges aided by your legislation, and your acknowledgment of the joint progress made for refuge funding with your colleagues in Appropriations, supported by the CARE Organizations, is right on the mark.

You hit the nail on the head, however, when you referred to the advances so far as a "down payment on the maintenance backlog." As you pointed out, while increases have been significant, there is much work to be done to reach the goal of having a fully operational system by 2003.

The effort by the CARE group is based on the common understanding that refuges have to have appropriate staffing and funding to be managed effectively regardless of whether your interest is in just knowing the refuge and its wildlife are secure, or in utilizing results of good management through hunting, fishing or other wildlife dependent outdoor recreation. As we have testified in the past, CARE has examined alternative measures to solve the funding problem including cost reduction, cost sharing, cost recovery through user fees, and volunteer work to meet the needs of refuges. All of these and other activities assist the system in carrying out its functions. However, after six years of work together we have come to believe strongly that the public good cannot be fully served without significant additional federal dollars being provided for the operation of our complex refuge system.

A strong measure of the support that has been maintained by the diverse organizations and the Congress is due to a new level of accountability by the Fish and Wildlife Service for the use of funds to operate their refuges. The Service has worked with CARE to provide data indicating each year exactly how funds were spent in comparison to the justifications provided to the Congress for those funds. Internal Service processes for prioritizing operation and maintenance needs have provided more assurance that the funds are going for truly important tasks on refuges. In helping to promote this level of accountability, CARE has conducted a detailed, written evaluation each of the past two years on how that money was spent.

Attached is the most recent evaluation of a full fiscal year of spending by the Service in attempting to reduce its backlog of both operation and maintenance needs. Satisfying a group of eighteen organizations such that they all put their name on such an evaluation is a demanding task. The organizations named on this report have been willing to put their own credibility on the line to say the funds are being spent as we had hoped and this is an investment worth continuing.

The concept of a detailed plan by the Service to guide the work of the Commission and the Congress in providing for the needs of refuges is very important. Congress, the CARE organizations, and the public will find great value in such a comprehensive look at refuge needs. CARE itself from the early stages felt the need for an expression of a goal. Attached is the most recent plan supported by CARE to substantially reduce the funding backlog problems. You will note that it is based on several years of detailed interactions with the Service and evaluations of how money was been spent, in relation to what the real needs are on the ground. We proposed from the beginning that a significant increment of funding, designed to substantially improve the operating capability of refuges, was the most reasonable objective. This, then, is not a "Cadillac" plan to build all of the infrastructure that might be desirable for the future of each refuge. Rather,

this is an expression of the funding base CARE thinks needs to be achieved for the refuges to function as a system with all of its parts working.

Attached also is a single page that constitutes our message about needs this year, while talking with the Congress about FY 2001 funding needs. It appraises how far we have come in meeting the original objective that CARE set to be achieved by the 2003 Centennial year. While we have made considerable progress with tremendous help from the Congress, we are far from having achieved what CARE has believed for several years is the basic level of advancement necessary to put the refuge system on a sound operating basis. To that extent, we believe the CARE Plan is a good foundation from which to move strongly toward a larger vision to be achieved by the Centennial.

The enhanced visibility and accountability of refuges played a role in the Congress allocating \$20 million annually for 5 years from Transportation funds to maintain refuge roads. This has helped reduce the backlog. We need to be innovative in seeking the funding to solve this large backlog and come closer to the level of funding the CARE plan provides.

Mr. Chairman, you have requested comment on the proposed separation of the National Wildlife Refuges as an agency outside the Fish and Wildlife Service. One of the operating rules of the CARE Alliance is that we avoid using the CARE umbrella to deal with anything other than operations and maintenance. Therefore, the following comments on that subject are not a statement on behalf of Care itself, but rather the perspective of the Wildlife Management Institute about this issue. There is widespread concern and little support for this separate agency concept. Among the concerns about this separate agency concept is its impact on the Fish and Wildlife Service and refuges themselves. First, the removal seven years ago of a thousand employees and over \$60 million in research programs from the Fish and Wildlife Service is an enduring, crippling blow from which the agency may not recover. It's most active scientists were removed under great controversy, and while some cooperative work has continued because of personal relationships, this arrangement is not currently meeting the needs of the agency. The Fish and Wildlife Service is less active in scientific and professional circles. At an important time in it's history when new leadership is needed to replace the large number of experienced employees that will retire in the next few years, there is no longer any connection with these highly trained people to move them into leadership positions. The agency is currently under stress regarding several major programs, and doesn't need any added crises.

Separating refuges from the agency with primary endangered species and migratory bird authority, when management and acquisition of so many refuges are targeted at those wildlife, doesn't make sense. Staffing and funding a new agency would remove a huge segment of funding from the Fish and Wildlife Service. As far as budgets go, the research function moved to the Geological Survey has not done well. Nor is it likely that a separate refuge agency would automatically draw more support. To the contrary, it would be isolated in dealing with development and public use pressure that are inevitable. No matter how large operational and maintenance backlogs look for refuges, or how impatient refuge supporters are for more progress, funding backlogs are larger for other land management agencies. A new agency would still compete for scarce dollars against other land management agencies with no assurance of a better outcome.

Mr. Chairman, the record of the last five years shows the greatest progress for national wildlife refuges in several decades. The 1997 Improvement Act clarified the mission of refuges as taking care of wildlife first, and identified certain wildlife dependent recreation uses as refuge purposes. The Act passed the Congress with only one dissenting vote. Policies implementing it are currently being reviewed by stakeholders, public processes are handling individual refuge plans, and long standing issues of compatibility of nonwildlife-related uses are being solved.

This unprecedented, bipartisan support is a product of extensive work on behalf of national wildlife refuges by a wide array of stakeholders across the spectrum of wildlife and fishery interests. The work of CARE, composed of 18 different organizations, has elevated the profile of refuges in Interior, the Administration and Congress. Including Transportation funds, more than a \$140 million new dollars for operations and maintenance of refuges have been provided through hard work by committed individuals and organizations. Responsible leaders in Congress, both Republican and Democrat, have personally supported more funding for refuges. Chairman Ralph Regula of the House Appropriations Subcommittee which deals with refuges, publicly stated his personal goal of solving the backlog of maintenance and operations by the Centennial Anniversary of refuges in 2003.

In response to the needs of refuges, Service Director Clark held an unprecedented meeting of refuge staff and stakeholders in the fall of 1998, and charted a strong course in "Fulling The Promise" a refuge vision for the future. Confronted with disenchantment about internal organization of the Service, focusing particularly on the stature of the refuge program, Director Clark instituted a review that concluded that adjustments should be made. She has proposed a major reorganization that considerably elevates the profile of the refuge program in Washington, and in the field. We think the Service is moving in the right direction, and that the separate agency concept is not the way to go.

As you so aptly pointed out in your introductory statement for the Centennial legislative proposal, we have yet a long way to go and a lot of work to do. A new agency pose more risk to refuges and the Service than is warranted by any positive potential. We call upon those who have a deep interest in refuges to reaffirm their dedication to the work begun with the CARE effort, the Congress, and the American people. The Centennial legislation would appropriately lead us all in that direction.

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